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ABSTRACT

The magnitude of crime, violence, victimization, and associated disruption in the urban schools of the United States severely impairs the educational process and the normal psychological development of many students. The problems of urban schools result from the problems of the larger community, but the community also holds the solutions to violence and traumatic stress. Increased cooperation between the school and the community can be implemented through a variety of channels. Community and parent involvement in various forms is critical to violence prevention. Professional development for teachers can prepare them to address violence and the consequences of urban stress with their students while creating an educational environment that fosters conflict resolution. Any approach to the complex phenomenon of urban violence, victimization, and traumatic stress must be systemic. Enhancing psychological services, ensuring adequate nutrition, and providing a safe and caring environment will contribute to closing the achievement gap and relieving the effects of urban problems. (Contains 42 references.) (SLD)

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VIOLENCE AND TRAUMATIC STRESS IN URBAN SCHOOLS

Amani Wilson, Ph.D.

Occasional Paper Series: Volume X, Number 3

Prepared for "Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision to Guide Change in Beliefs and Practice," the 1995 conference of the Urban Education National Network, a Regional Educational Laboratory Network Program

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INTRODUCTION

The magnitude of crime, violence, victimization, and associated disruption in the urban schools of the United States severely impairs the educational process and the normal psychological development of many students. Because the trauma in the community at large is even more prevalent, a cascade of highly destructive factors negatively impacts academic achievement.

In the field of developmental cross-cultural research, areas such as classification, memory, perception, logical reasoning, and other cognitive activities have been found to relate to the school experience of children (Lave, 1977; Rogoff, 1981). Rogoff and Morelli (1989) conclude from this that human functioning and maturation cannot be separated from the contexts of their activities. On the other hand, when comparing many urban schools and their communities' context and environment, it must be recognized that schools continue to be relatively safe havens for positive growth and overall skill and ability enhancement. The Criminal Victimization Reports of the U.S. Justice Department for 1994 indicated that rape, robbery, and assault are about twice as likely to occur in the home as in school. Thus schools located in urban areas reflect their communities problems including increasing violence. Schools continue to be a place for opportunity and learning and a place for teachers and administrators to make a positive impact on young people's lives.

And although violence and trauma are not limited to large cities or public schools, Rob Jones, president of the Virginia Educational Association contends that "violence is a societal problem which comes to school, and our increasingly violent schools are reflective of an increasingly violent society" (New York Times, 1993).

At least 157,000 crimes are committed every day in schools in the United States (Quarles, 1989). Annually, three million incidents of assault, rape, and robbery occur on school property, and approximately 525,000 assaults and robberies occur in secondary schools each month. The ninth largest police force in the United States is funded by the New York Public Schools (Reed and Shaw, 1993). Recently in Rochester, New York, teachers placed a higher priority on security than on salary in their contract negotiations (Haberman, 1994). According to the National Educational Association, in 1992 there were approximately 70,000 assaults on teachers, a low estimate given that many incidents go unreported (Haberman, 1994). The National Association of School Psychologists has cited 1991 statistics that indicate that 900 teachers were threatened each hour during the school day and that 40 were assaulted each hour on school property (New York Times, 1993).

Of America's sixty-four million children, 75% live in metropolitan areas. A recent survey of seven hundred cities disclosed a noticeable increase in school crime and violence in the past five years, with 38% of the schools in the largest cities most likely to report increased violence (Boston Herald, 1994). The Uniform Crime Reports for the United States illuminate a burgeoning problem in the community as well. The homicide

rate reached an all time high in 1991 with the greatest increase in large urban areas (1991). Furthermore, the youth of the United States have been extremely affected by this rise in violent crime in the past decade. Specifically, 1990 had a juvenile violence arrest rate of 430 per 100,000. This is 27% higher than the 1980 rate. The high growth rate of gang membership and the availability of weapons contributes to this significantly.

Although the rates of crime and victimization cut across racial and socioeconomic lines, ethnic minorities are especially affected. At present, ethnic minorities constitute a majority of the student enrollment in all but two of the twenty-five largest cities in the United States (Villegas, 1991). This demographic trend will continue because ethnic minorities , which today account for 20% of the total school age population, will increase to two-fifths of the school age population by the year 2000.

African-American, Hispanic, and Native American youth are more at risk as victims of violence. In addition, in recent years waves of immigrants from Asia, the West Indies, Brazil, Africa, and the Pacific Islands have at times resulted in conflict between immigrants and traditional minorities. The impact of violence, victimization, and trauma for these youth is worsened by the problems of cultural transition and assimilation (American Psychological Association, 1993), and, of course, segregation, racism, discrimination, and poverty also play a negative role in their socialization, education, and development.

The homicide rate in the United States reached an all time high in 1991, with the greatest increase in large urban areas (Uniform Crime Report, 1991). A study of inner-city children by Shakoor and Chalmers (1989) revealed that 75% of the boys and 70% of the girls had seen someone stabbed, robbed, shot, or killed. In New Orleans, another study found that over 90% of children from the inner-city had witnessed a violent act, 40% had seen a dead body, and 70% had seen weapons employed (National Center for Clinical Infant Program, 1991). Crime, violence and victimization are ever present in the urban communities of the United States, with predominantly poor and minority children taking the brunt of trauma and victimization. These persistent psychological traumas impact academic achievement as well as emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and interpersonal functioning. Consequently, normal and successful educational and personal growth are substantially compromised. Hornbeck (1992) asserts that "We have a miserable performance record in educating low income, racial and language-minority students. Given the changing demographics of our nation, we cannot succeed economically or in sustaining our democracy unless we succeed educationally with those students with whom we have historically failed."

CHALLENGES

Recent years have seen an increased focus on the impact of violence on children. Most studies have dealt primarily with the reaction of individuals to discrete traumatic events such as natural disasters, war, and hostage taking (Pynoos et al., 1987; Terr, 1983). Some of this research has focused on how chronic danger causes children to accommodate and attempt to adjust to it with persistent alterations in personality and behavioral functioning and frequently with the development of full-blown post-traumatic stress disorders (Garbarino, 1990). Because of an abusive environment, the developmental conflicts of many children are not resolved. Such issues as competence, identity, autonomy, initiative, and intimacy become arrested because of the repetitive intrusion of trauma in their lives (Herman, 1992).

When post-traumatic stress disorder was first included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, traumatic events were described as "outside the range of usual human experience" (Brett, 1988). However, crime, violence, and victimization in urban schools and communities have become all too common and usual. Indeed, Vygotsky's theory (1978) proposes that children develop skills in their higher mental processes through the immediate interactions with their context, and the corresponding activity. This is critical when we consider that violence and aggression are a far too common event in young children's lives. And children's social interaction then structures individual activity and is seen in children's war games and exhibitions of aggression. Central to his postulations is an emphasis on both the institutional and interpersonal levels of social context. Vygotsky reinforced the idea that interpersonal situations were important for guiding children in the development of their skills and behaviors considered important in their cultures.

The response to trauma is affected by the nature of the event (origin, intensity, duration, degree of life threat, and suffering, etc.) and such social-interpersonal variables as life history, personality, coping skills, state of mind and both social and family supports (Sparks, 1993). It is not necessary for a youth to be a direct victim of violence to be victimized, and research by McCann et al. (1988) strongly suggests a relationship between the amount of violence that children witness and their emotional disturbance and resultant development of symptoms.

Individual Responses to Trauma

The ubiquitous exposure to violence causes the development of symptoms that adversely impair school adjustment, emotional stability, and positive orientation to the future (Terr, 1983; Pynoos, 1988; Bell and Jenkins, 1991). Defenses employed to cope with repeated and severe trauma can include massive denial and major avoidance and even amnesia. The clinical presentation is often characterized by absence of emotions (extreme "psychic numbing"); superficial attachments to others; intense rage; marked fears and anxiety; persistent depression; increased aggression to self and others, and

extreme reactions to traumatic reexposure (van der Kolk, 1989). Intrusive imagery and disinterest in significant activities, as well as attention difficulties have been observed in children who have known victims of violent acts (American Psychological Association, 1993). Traumatic events catastrophically tear the connection between these at-risk children and their communities.

Violence and trauma create formidable tasks of adaptation. Youth trapped in abusive school and community environments have to constantly struggle with maintaining a sense of basic trust and safety. As Herman (1992) states, they must compensate for the failure of adult care and protection with immature psychological defenses. Some of these distress symptoms, such as aggressivity, substance abuse, delinquency, and pregnancy, far too frequently mask the extent of psychological disturbances in these students. Thus, young victims of violence and witnesses to violence (indirect or covictims) may not seem to manifest signs of psychological damage because of denial, massive suppression of feelings, and behavioral acting out. Other negative feedback loops develop and contribute to further violence and victimization. For example, substance and alcohol abuse used by youth to self-medicate and reduce their psychological pain and emotional distress commonly impairs judgment, raises levels of impulsivity, and lowers inhibitions to violence.

Impact in the School Setting

As violence, crime, and fear increase, the quality of education in urban schools decreases. The levels of fear and anxiety regarding personal safety contribute to greater levels of absenteeism and may also result in carrying weapons to school. One study of junior high school students in large urban areas demonstrated that 33% of the students reported a fear of three or more places in their schools (Rubel, 1980). More importantly, the fear of violence was independent of actual physical assaults or robberies. Rubel also points out that because of violence and crime, a continuing stream of unruly and dysfunctional behavior (absenteeism, rebellion against authority, carelessness, minor rule infractions, etc.) get lost in the horrendous background noise of trauma and tend to remain somewhat unnoticed by members of the school community. As a result, these unwanted behaviors, in the absence of active interventions, become institutionalized and accepted as part of the school culture. Furthermore, as adults in the school community appear powerless and seemingly unable to control events, the students lose respect for authority and determine that "might makes right" (Rubel, 1980). This then oftentimes begins to set off a chain of event whereby the student begins to avoid being at school, compensates for the lack of respect and power in the school and joins a gang, begins to carry a weapon, and draws closer to the gangster persona for purposes of safety, affiliation, protection and status. This process of deviant socialization cascades into another tragic feedback loop and escalates and exacerbates the basic problem.

The staff and teachers who are responsible for these students during this important part of their socialization and development also function in the highly traumatic and stressful environments that they, too, perceive as dangerous and life threatening. As the

communities at large are often referred to as "war zones," the schools are termed "combat zones." Many teachers working in urban schools themselves present with symptoms of psychological and psychosomatic disorders that could be characterized as traumatic in origin. They have succumbed emotionally and or physically to the continued stress that occurs, with or without actual physical trauma, while teaching in inner-city schools (Bloch, 1980). This health problem mirrors their students' struggle, and, as a consequence, these important adults in their socialization network are often less motivated, less engaged, and less helpful because of their own psychological turmoil.

SOLUTIONS

Various approaches are not absolutely guaranteed to be helpful, and the expense of many measures will be a substantial obstacle in the face of current attitudes of hopelessness, helplessness, "benign neglect," and the thrust for budget cutting at all levels of government. Moreover, many interventions may also be difficult to implement and will require a great deal of leadership and sustained commitment. However, not all initiatives are expensive, and certainly passivity and inaction will be far more costly in the long run. The stance of the American Psychological Association is positive and hopeful: "The A.P.A. Commission on Violence and Youth overwhelmingly concluded, on the basis of the body of psychological research on violence, that violence is not a random, uncontrollable, or inevitable occurrence. Many factors, both individual and social, contribute to an individual's propensity to use violence, and many of these factors are within our power to change. Although we acknowledge that the problem of violence involving youth is staggering and that there are complex macrosocial, biomedical, and other considerations that must be addressed in a comprehensive response to the problem, there is overwhelming evidence that we can intervene effectively in the lives of young people to reduce or prevent their involvement in violence" (American Psychological Association, 1993).

Community Level

As has been stated, the traumatic victimization of the larger school community massively disrupts the learning process and inhibits academic achievement considerably. But within the community also lies the solution. Urban school communities, by themselves, cannot stop the endemic and increasing disorder and violence, yet school communities, in cooperation with their community at large, may well be able to address this problem through a variety of therapeutic measures and interventions. The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) has for many years considered an ecological approach to the many challenges facing schools and has met with success. In their publication *Whole Child, Whole Community* they include a conversation between two principals that accurately captures the community solution.

> *In these times, if you care for the child, you have to care for the family. If you care for the family, you have to reach out for the community. We can't reach our academic goals unless we help our community address social and economic needs.*
>
> Institute for Responsive Education, 1993.

On a larger level, Anyon (1994) states that "We must improve the community of which the school is, in large part, a product. This view suggests a revised conception of educational reform." The author expresses this point metaphorically: " It seems to me that trying to reform a school without attending to the social context in which the school is embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door." Thus this educator presents the dire need for reviving the political and economic life of the inner city to revive the schools.

Increased cooperation between school and community can be implemented through a variety of channels. For example, Scherer (1980) proposes the employment of more liaison staff; regular and formal linkages between the school and other community agencies; and the use of school space for community activities. Schools already provide extra-curricular activities such as drama, art, athletics, and music, but these should be addressed more directly at the students who are at the most risk as a substitute for their involvement in deviant activities such as gang membership. And every effort should be made to incorporate organizations such as the Elma Lewis school for the Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, which works in a collaborative nature with neighboring schools on producing plays.

Community also includes families and parents. As individuals and institutions change, so does the family. For example, families, especially Latino ones, have often been seen as insulating children from societal trauma and conflict as a way to protect them from the many stressors encountered in their daily lives. But their families, too, are under siege in neighborhoods subject to increasing levels of violence compounded by the deleterious and insidious impact of poverty. Hamburg (1985) observed that "poverty does not harm all children but it does put them at greater developmental risk through the direct physical consequences of deprivation, the indirect consequences of severe stress on the parent-child relationship, and the over-hanging pall of having a depreciated status in the social environment."

The consequences of parents not getting involved can be very negative. For example, a recent survey (Metropolitan Life, 1994) found that a majority of students who have been victims of violence or who have been physically harmed while in or in close proximity to the school stated that their parents never communicated with the school staff. In addition, only one out of ten students believe their parents to have such contact with the school once a year. Low levels of communication can further alienate both the parents and the child, and in many cases may confirm students low regard for adults and or parents in their lives, for they don't see them as participants or advocates in their school lives.

Teacher Professional Development

The role of teachers and their acquisition of knowledge and skills to deal with new challenges is critical (Anyon, 1994). In a study of almost 400 educational projects, a number of factors were linked to the success of staff development: a sense of teacher efficiency; their feeling that they could be successful with poorly motivated students; collaborative planning between teachers and administrators regarding teacher development programs; practical advice from consultants; specific administrative support and concrete commitment to staff development programs; skill training followed by staff-support activities after the end of skill training; and most pertinent to the problem of violence and disorder in the schools, teachers feeling that the school is a good environment to teach and work in from day to day.

To help teachers cope with the threat of increasing violence Bloch (1980) recommends that teachers should be provided with general assistance centers outside of the school community on a confidential basis to deal with the stress of their school setting. Furthermore, he proposes that teachers be given specialized training before being placed in stressful urban schools, asserting that rehearsal and familiarization with the consequences of potential events occurring in and around these schools could well minimize the impact of psychological or physical trauma. Finally, in schools with high violence profiles, Bloch prescribes teacher support groups to share and work through the events and stressful consequences of campus situations. As with other staff development processes, administrative support and leadership is crucial. Also, teacher rotation to less chaotic assignments could be used to advantage. In addition, effective student discipline is also considered integral in improving teacher morale.

Villegas (1990) indicates that despite the national student population becoming more culturally heterogeneous, the teaching force is expected to become more homogenous. Effective teachers do not need to be members of their students' cultural groups, but they must be sensitive to their cultural characteristics. Specifically, to assist students in personal development and growth, ethnic sensitivity must be incorporated into the school policies, programs, and practices. Placing the education of minority urban students into the context of ethnic and cultural diversity can enhance academic achievement, self-esteem, interracial relations, and psychological adjustment, since social and economic factors mediate these goals positively or negatively (Gay, 1994). Furthermore, Delpit (1995) argues that in order for there to be effective teachers, there must also be a recognition of the students' perception of teacher intent. This is especially true for African-American boys, who often exhibit a higher degree of physical activity.

Related to this, there is the phenomenon of the ***street*** persona vs. the ***student*** one, which is at odds and conflictual. For example, from the book *Other People's Children Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* by Lisa Delpit, a 12 year old describes three types of teachers:

> *the black teachers, who are <u>not</u> afraid of the black kids; the white teachers, a <u>few</u> of whom are not afraid of black kids; and the largest group of white teachers who are <u>all</u> afraid of black kids.*

The author explains the student's view as perhaps being due to a difference in teacher discourse styles. One is direct and explicit and is seen by students as commanding and in control. This style is exhibited by the black teacher and a few whites. Most of the white teachers, however, exhibit a less direct style, often asking students to please do something rather that telling them they must. To some students, such a style is sometimes interpreted as less commanding and showing fear.

The Classroom/School

The school "climate" is also very important in preventing disorder and violence and, accordingly, a focus on clear, equitable, firm, and persistent rules can be of invaluable assistance in improving the overall school environment for everyone. This does not mean that only authoritarian methods and approaches are called for. After all, many urban students live in neighborhoods where they are daily socialized into threats, physical abuse, violence, and, often, death. Punishments such as suspensions, time-outs, and even expulsion are not necessarily taken seriously by a largely violence and aggression desensitized student body; and it is very easy to reinforce violence by falling into a "get tough" attitude with students who already know that *violence works*. The jury is still out on the effectiveness of punitive approaches to discipline problems, but it is clear that a *preventive* approach does work. For example, an elementary school in Hartford uses students to mediate conflicts, and preliminary observational data reflect a lowered incidence in school violence and aggression. Corporal punishment, although eliminated from most U.S. schools continues to be the method of choice, in some regions, especially the south. Bailey and Taylor (1994), in their study on corporal punishment, came to the conclusion that many teachers don't have the time or the training to attend to many disruptive children's individual needs. And they recommend more psychologists get involved in diagnostic work before resorting to punitive measures. Both anticipating potential problems and addressing them before they get worse has proven successful in many cases.

Within the schools, peer counseling, mediation, and conflict resolution programs should also be offered. There should be a close liaison with community medical and mental health facilities to make appropriate referrals as needed. Moreover, teachers and staff should be specially trained in recognizing the signs of trauma and stress in their students so that further evaluation can occur through prompt referrals.

The task of recognizing the signs of trauma is made more difficult since obvious symptoms are not always overt. Clinical practice with youth in the innercity strongly suggests the tragic universality of victimization, loss, and grief. Many youth that this author has been involved with clinically report as many as a dozen victims of homicide with whom they have had a close relationship. Of course, even one murder on school grounds ripples though that community with devastating pain and trauma and forces many individuals, young and old, to reexperience trauma.

Crisis intervention personnel, approaches, and plans in the schools are essential. Schools in which teachers and students are involved in conflict need on-site professionals who are specially trained to defuse crises by leading open forum discussions and to offer immediate and subsequent psychological care to help various individuals cope with trauma. Moreover, an important task of such school emergency response teams would be to intervene in the school community after traumatic events via debriefing sessions that could be structured to bring people together to share information; provide psychoeducation; allow individuals to discuss and deal with the intense feelings stirred up in a tragedy; and, finally, assist in developing strategies for long-range coping (Folly, 1993). Follow-up assistance and interventions should also be a part of the overall rehabilitation, intervention, and, hopefully and eventually, healing.

The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands offers a comprehensive School Emergency Response Plan Handbook (Fuentes & Rose, 1995) that is intended to create and foster a proactive approach to school crises. Such handbooks are not an alternative to any violence prevention programs but represent a point along the school safety/violence prevention continuum. They can create and foster a "proactive" larger community approach to potential crises in schools by asking schools to identify the roles personnel will assume in a crisis situation. For example, who calls the parents; who handles or speaks with the media, (or inversely who would not be a person to speak with the media); who assesses the psychological support needed, etc. This type of anticipatory planning, although labor intensive, could be very useful in creating an atmosphere of safety and preparedness. Moreover, Fuentes & Rose emphasize that by going through this "preparation," some problems that may be festering can be uncovered and ameliorated.

A more direct intervention and approach to the problem of violence in the schools is aimed at rehabilitating rather than punishing the offender. For example, the Boston Public School Department has been sending students caught with weapons to the Barron Assessment and Counseling center for the past four years. The children are provided with a comprehensive psychological and educational assessment, and a discharge plan is carefully crafted. Counseling, violence prevention classes, regular academic work, and trips to local detention facilities are aspects of the program. Apparently the program has had a very low recidivism rate. In addition, Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith of the Harvard School of Public Health has developed a curriculum employed in Boston and several other cities that attempts to teach children how to prevent violence; it is psychoeducational in nature (U.S.News and World Report, 1990).

The American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth (1993) asserts that diversion programs to keep high risk youth out of the juvenile justice system "have great merit and there is evidence that diversion programs with strong grounding in psychological theory can have a positive effect on recidivism rates." It is believed that behavioral contracting, child advocacy, and counseling are preferable to exposing pre-delinquent youth who are involved with the court on minor charges to the risk of victimization and criminal socialization in the often crowded and understaffed juvenile facilities. Some of these therapeutic techniques that could benefit children who have

adopted aggressive behavior patterns might also include problem-solving skills training, child management training for parents (e.g., anger control, negotiation and positive reinforcement), and family therapy.

School Design

School architectural design should also be scrutinized relative to improving school safety and order, but this will be obviously very costly and in many instances prohibitive. Although smaller schools are more expensive to operate than larger schools, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) found that small junior high schools in particular, had fewer problems with victimization. The "school-within-a-school" approach, that is, composing multiple, socially discrete environments within a single large school, may be a beneficial alternative. In this configuration, individual students do not get "lost in the cracks" and can be given much more individual attention. Smaller schools can also reduce the fragmentation and sense of alienation that students often feel in large institutions. The Gottfredson study, which involved surveying teacher and student questionnaires from 600 schools, strongly suggests that large schools with limited resources experience more problems with violence and disorder. The authors of this study explain that according to Pence and Taylor (1978), individuals in an environment exert social control when the number of participants is so small that the conforming behavior of all persons is necessary to conduct ordinary activities. Thus when an educational environment has few members and an adequate number of staff, its participants will attempt to control or restrain deviant behavior. However when an environment is over-populated, individuals who deviate from conforming behavior are not required and may be rejected. This strongly suggests the need for smaller social environments where teachers have much responsibility for and contact with a limited number of students in several aspects of their daily activities.

Clearly the problem of violence in the schools has reached such shocking proportions that communities across the United States are angry and no longer willing to tolerate the state of affairs as "business as usual." At the most basic level it is absolutely imperative that security programs in urban schools be organized and improved. The prevention of crime against people, facilities, and equipment is central (Grealy, 1979). Security personnel should be well trained and vigilant; and their work should be in close cooperation with local city police. Currently there are school patrols in only 70% of the communities surveyed in a recent school crime survey (Boston Herald, 1994); and where the crime and violence rate is still low, such security measures can forestall an increase in violent acts. Only one-fifth of schools surveyed in 700 cities in a National League of Cities study indicate the use of metal detectors. Careful consideration should be given to their installation to curb the presence of weapons in the schools.

Research

There is limited research that is relevant to violence in the schools. Public relations issues mean that the actual incidence of violence is underreported; but accurate statistics are a must. Another important gap cited by the American Psychological Association's Commission of Youth and Violence (1993) is the lack of availability of outcome data on many existing youth violence prevention or treatment interventions. For example, interventions directed at youth who have been victims or witnesses to violence are very difficult to evaluate, since these interventions usually occur in uncontrolled settings. In addition, violence programs that are simply taken off the shelf do not sufficiently accommodate to the unique environment of a particular school.

Posner (1994), writing in the *Harvard Education Letter*, argues that evaluations of such programs have revealed little evidence of success and explains that a review of such evaluations indicates that the lack of observed success is not just due to flaws in the evaluation process but to lack of focus on targeted populations. Moreover, behavioral skills appear to suffer a marked decline after six months, which strongly suggests the need to engage in a sustained effort over a pupil's entire school life.

SUMMARY

The quality of life for millions of young Americans is at stake and in a real sense, so too is the future of this country. Social policy and government action or inaction substantially alter the conditions in which young people live and are educated. Given a persistent historical emphasis on theories of alleged minority deficiency and inferiority (Murray and Herstein, 1994) strongly suggests that remedial efforts are to no avail, it is not clear if this society has the ethics, fortitude, and motivation to create public social policies that could begin to intervene effectively in creating better urban schools and closing the achievement gap for minority children. Indeed, economic and racial inequalities have been intractable problems in the United States, and fundamental improvements in these chronic problems will require a sweeping and radical change in attitudes across the nation.

Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) contend that fearful concerns of a society that is increasingly violent and unpredictable have contributed to middle class flight from urban schools. This has and will contribute to urban schools becoming impoverished "dumping grounds" for only the poor-children of minorities from families without the resources to flee and frequently without the resources to improve their schools.

This paper has not fully exhausted the extent to which violence and trauma affect students, teachers, and communities; nor have all the solutions to this very complex and layered issue been included. But it is important to note that the approach to this very

complex phenomenon must be systemic. Enhancing psychological services, ensuring adequate nutrition and above all providing a safe and caring environment, will all contribute to closing the achievement gap. If the community at large is part of the problem, it must now also be part of the solution.

AFTERWORD

This paper is one of a set of papers entitled "Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision to Guide Change in Beliefs and Practice." The papers were commissioned by the Urban Education National Network (UENN), a project of the Regional Educational Laboratory Network.

The Regional Educational Laboratory Network

During the nearly three decades since their inception, the regional educational laboratories (funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education) have proven to be valuable resources in their regions. Each laboratory identifies regional needs and develops resources to help meet them. In cooperation with partners in the state and intermediate education agencies, universities, professional associations, foundation, businesses and other social service agencies, the laboratories provide programs and services to schools and others working to improve education.

In 1992, the Regional Educational Laboratory Network was established in recognition of the growing needs for coordinated national responses to American's educational challenges and the potential of the laboratories working collaboratively to help meet this need. All ten have joined together to formalize, consolidate, and extend their capability to act as a national system.

The structure for achieving this goal is a set of collaborative projects, staffed and supported by all or a subset of the regional laboratories. Each project has an originating (or "lead") laboratory which provides a project coordinator. The coordinator forms a steering committee (called the design team) to shape the project plan and activities. Collaborating laboratories then provide one or more staff, usually part-time, to help carry out the project.

The Urban Education National Network

In an effort to support the restructuring efforts of the nation's urban school districts, the Urban Education National Network (UENN) was established in 1993 to (1) consolidate the knowledge base in urban education, and (2) bring focus to the expertise and resources in urban education which exist in the regional educational laboratories. A central role of the network is to provide information and assistance to educators as they work to increase the academic performance of urban students whose traditions and experiences are not adequately represented within the current educational system. The UENN task force also seeks to contribute to present reform proposals and activities bring carried out at both the national and local community levels.

Disturbing numbers of poor and minority students in our urban schools continue to underachieve academically. In spite of years of reform, there remains a persistent achievement gap between students in our urban schools and elsewhere. Many practitioners and policymakers concur that this situation cannot persist; urban students must be given the caliber of education they need to fully contribute to our democratic society. Simply stating that our goal is "higher achievement for all students" isn't enough. What we know about transforming our nation's city schools is the need to impart knowledge about what works best in the urban context and provide them ongoing support for their reform efforts.

A groundswell of activity on behalf of urban learners and their schools is being generated at the local level. Local communities, including parents, citizens, educator, and business persons, are mobilizing to redesign their educational and human development organizations to better serve urban children and their families through a system of integrated services. Much of this activity has grown out of recent efforts by urban districts to decentralize bureaucracies that have often impeded change and innovation at the local school level. Additional activity has resulted from reform efforts taking place in other social service agencies serving urban children and their families.

The movement toward integrated services is but one of the newer conceptualizations of student development, the teaching-learning process, and educational groups that are convening to support the restructuring of urban school districts. Conventional educational approaches are being altered, in some places radically, to prepare urban schools and teachers to educate students of the 21st century.

The UENN commissioned "Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision to Guide Change in Beliefs and Practices" to:

- Define the nature of the urban academic performance obstacles, i.e., clarify the obstacles to the development of urban lifelong learners, such as the lack of curriculum relevance and authenticity, and describe supportive environments, appropriate staff development, and meaningful instruction and assessments for urban learners.

- Identify, validate, and disseminate a knowledge base of theory and practice that will better inform the laboratory system and decisionmaking relevant to overcoming these performance obstacles.

For more information on "Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision to Guide Change in Beliefs and Practices", contact the Publications Department, The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands, 300 Brickstone Square, Suite 950, Andover, MA 01810, 508-470-0098.

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